Westminster Shorter Catechism and Barriers to Catholicity

By Rich Lusk

The Westminster Shorter Catechism is rightly cherished as one of the greatest catechetical documents of the Reformation era. It has served — and continues to serve — as a handy compendium of biblical religion. Countless generations of children have grown up on its truths, nurtured into long lives of fruitful service in the kingdom by its elegance and order. It is a monument of Reformed scholarship. It is theologically mature, competent, logical, and clear. It reflects a stunning theological consensus, attained against all odds, in the mid-seventeenth century. It is unrivalled in terms of a providing a technical statement of the Reformed faith.

Nevertheless, the Catechism can serve as a barrier to Reformed catholicity. The Shorter Catechism essentially reduces the biblical story to a set of propositions. It treats theology in a highly analytic way, as a matter of defining terms (e.g., "What is justification?", "What is sanctification?", etc.). The Bible is pressed through a logical grid, rather than taken on its own terms (e.g., "God" is defined by a list of attributes rather than identified by his narrative actions). Biblical concepts are, on the whole, abstracted from history and experience (as comparison with the Nicene Creed bears out). Biblical typology, that is, a promise and fulfillment scheme of reading Scripture, is screened out in the Catechism to make way for a systematic arrangement of theological topics.

This kind of scholastic approach can have its place. But it must be kept in mind that it is significantly different in form and function from the Bible's own way of communicating truth. The Bible is not

full of theological terms and their technical, precise definitions. I believe that is by design. In other words, the Bible is inspired not only in content and substance, but also in form and shape.

The Bible consists primarily of theological art. The Bible as a whole is cast in the form of a story, an overarching metanarrative, moving from creation to consummation. The Bible is literature. It is full of songs and poetry, of symbols and images. It is shot through with humor, irony, sarcasm, simile, metaphor, and so on. It has an ornate literary architecture, employing ancient literary forms of chiasm, parallelism, repetition, puns, and onomatopoeia. These structures are internal to the Bible's message. The portions of the Bible most specifically directed to children take the form of stories (e.g., Genesis, the gospels) or pithy, picturesque aphorisms (e.g., Proverbs) or songs (Psalms).

Thus, the Bible is an entirely different kind of literary artifact than the Shorter Catechism. It dawned on me several years ago that the Shorter Catechism had a lot in common with my high school geometry text book. The Catechism, after all, is cast in the form of theological axioms. The axioms provide the premises from which one could supposedly deduce theological "proofs" (cf. the reference to deduction as a tool of biblical hermeneutics in WCF 1.6).

Only later did I come to find that the Shorter Catechism was principally authored by a man who left the Westminster Assembly to teach -- you guessed it! -- geometry. The Shorter Catechism was primarily the work of Reverend John Wallis, a leading mathematician who later became professor of geometry at Oxford. I think that is significant in evaluating the Catechism. Obviously, geometry is a noble field of learning. But it makes a horrible model for theology.

Biblical theology can never be made a matter of geometric proof. It can never have the precision of mathematical formulae. Biblical theology generally requires a different mindset than geometry. Doing theology by means of terms and definitions creates an aura of precision, which in reality is an illusion. It gives us an exaggerated sense of what we know. It makes us overconfident, thinking that our theological formulations are the best -- or perhaps even the only -- way to state the truth. Charles Hodge fell into just this trap, unfortunately, in adopting scientific rationalism as the model for theological inquiry. Hodge suggested the task of theology was to put the "facts" of Scripture in their "proper order" -- as if the Bible as God gave it was somehow defective because it wasn't given in logically organized systematic loci! He wrote, "Theology is the exhibition of the facts of scripture in their proper order and relation, with the principles or general truths involved in the facts themselves, and which pervade and harmonize the whole." He said the theologian is to the Bible what the natural scientist is to the creation. While appreciating Hodge's work as a scholar and churchman, I think he took the wrong paradigm for doing biblical studies.

This scholastic/scientific approach risks taking the mystery and wonder out of the biblical literature. It eliminates — at least in appearance and feel — the Bible's internal ambiguity and tension. But it is often in wrestling through those ambiguities and tension points that we arrive at wisdom. Scholastic methodology often provides a shortcut to easy answers, but we miss out on the glory that comes in searching out a matter (cf. Prov. 25:2).

Moreover, Biblical symbols and images are neglected, or turned into propositions, losing their literary impact. The beauty of the Bible is lost on us. Biblical theology simply cannot be exhaustively contained in scholastic-style propositions. Biblical exegesis has more in common with art than the empirical sciences. John Leith explains: "God's definitive revelation did not come in a proposition but in a person. The fact of the incarnation means that all propositional theology at best approximates the truth."

The purpose of a confession or catechism should not necessarily be to state the truth in the most precise form possible. Instead it should be to bring people into a deeper love relationship with the Triune God. But sometimes our quest for precision turns God into an "object" of study rather than a Father to be loved and served. The goal is not an airtight system of truth; the goal is creating covenant loyalty in the people of God. Stories, songs, and symbols can do that in way that abstract, decontextualized propositions cannot.

Steve Wilkins, following Leith, explains the problems inherent in the Westminsterian methodology. We become inclined to believe

> that human reason is able to take the infallible materials of the Bible and radically abstract them into precise propositions, putting them into a system that is logically airtight. Leith again makes a telling comment, "Theology may be impeccable logically but may correspond with nothing in the Holy Scripture or in human experience. Such a theology can continue to exist only as its affirmations become a work of righteousness or merit whereby men are saved by asserting a dead faith, just as they once believed they were saved by a pilgrimage or climbing a stairstep."

Unfortunately, this seems to be our position today.

Leith points out that though abstract precise theological propositions may appear to be more authoritative and clear, they may not accomplish the work theology is actually supposed to accomplish (i.e. bringing men to trust and love the Lord with all their hearts, souls, minds, and strength). "The Scots Confession used the framework of history — God's dealing with his people from Adam to Christ, and the decisive events in the life of Jesus Christ — as the framework of its theology. The consequence is that the doctrinal affirmation of the Scots Confession lack the precision, finality, and completeness of those of the Westminster Confession. It is not clear, however, that the Scots Confession is inferior in pointing men to God or in serving as man's confession of his faith."

The style of the Westminster Standards lends itself to misuse. And in fact, it is not uncommon for modern presbyterians to use the Standards in ways the divines themselves would not have approved of. Again, Wilkins:

> The precision of the Westminster formulae gives the impression of finality and completeness that is exaggerated. Because of this, the Confession and catechisms have been used as a "normative" definition of the faith. The Westminster Assembly never declared how the Confession of Faith was to be used but there is some evidence that the Assembly had no intention of making its formulations normative in the sense of seeing them as the bounds of orthodoxy. Neither is there any evidence that the members of the Assembly had any intention of requiring a "thorough subscription" to all the statements of the Confession as a test of orthodoxy. Anthony Tuckney rejects this overtly in a

> letter to a friend, "I gave my vote with others, that the Confession of Faith, putt-out by Authorities, should not bee required to bee eyther sworne or subscribed-too." Many members of the Assembly would be opposed to "strict subscription."

The Assembly did not intend to write the last confessional and catechetical documents in the history of the church. They knew the limitations under which they labored. Twentieth century Reformed stalwart John Murray noted that the Westminster Assembly did not produce a timeless creed because, after all, no such thing is possible for us before the last day.

> The creeds of the church have been framed in a particular historical situation to meet the needs of the church in that context, and have been oriented to a considerable extent in both their negative and positive declarations to the refutation of the errors confronting the church at that time. The creeds are therefore, historically complexioned in language and content and do not reflect the particular and distinguishing needs of subsequent generations . . .
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> There is the progressive understanding of the faith delivered to the saints. There is in the church the ceaseless activity of the Holy Spirit so that the church organically and corporately increases in knowledge unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ . . . [T]he Westminster Confession . . . is the epitome of the most mature thought to which the church of Christ had been led up to the year 1646. But are we to suppose that this progression ceased with that date? To ask the question is to answer it. An affirmative is to impugn the continued grace

> of which the Westminster Confession is itself an example at the time of its writing. There is more light to break forth from the living and abiding Word of God.

The fact that over fifty official Reformed creeds were produced in the 125 years prior to Westminster bears this out. For example, as Wilkins points out, when Bullinger and Jud signed the First Helvetic Confession, they knew they were not subscribing to a timeless system of truth:

> We wish in no way to prescribe for all churches through these articles a single rule of faith. For we acknowledge no other rule of faith than Holy Scripture. We agree with whoever agrees with this, although he uses different expressions from our Confession. For we should have regard for the fact itself and for the truth, not for the words. We grant to everyone the freedom to use his own expressions which are suitable for his church and will make use of this freedom ourselves, at the same time defending the true sense of the Confession against distortions.

This "freedom of expression" in Reformed theology is largely missing today, as is the understanding that orthodoxy is not reducible to a *particular* form of words. God's truth is so rich and varied and multi-faceted, there are numerous ways to say the truth. In terms of catholicity, the Catechism's form can all too easily make us too sure of ourselves. Armed with its trusty definitions, we think we have things pinned down. We think we have the last word on divine truth. But the outcome of this scholastic methodology is inevitable miscommunication with other Christians who have not been enculturated into our precise theological vocabulary. The

Catechism, if we're not careful, makes it hard to relate to Christians who do not share the Catechism's highly specialized, technical terminology.

In fact the Catechism can even act a blinder of sorts when it comes to reading the Bible, since the Bible does not use a technical vocabulary, and, in fact, uses terms in ways quite distinct from the Catechism itself (e.g., "justification" certainly does not function in the Westminsterian sense in 1 Tim. 3:16). The Catechism may appear to be a sort of infallible theological dictionary, a "reader's guide" to Scripture, but such an approach misuses the Catechism and misunderstands the Bible. People long for a timeless creed that will serve as the "final word," as a creed to end all creeds. But this idolizes a human interpretation of divine revelation.

Anthony Lane helpfully explains the status of theological language:

> Do our doctrines partake of the precision of mathematical formulae? If so, there can be no scope for diversity [of expression]. If the result of a sum is 15, all the other answers are simply wrong. This approach would imply an extreme and na□ve form of realism foreign to the way in which theology actually works . . .
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> If our theological language is not like mathematical formulae, what is it like? Unlike some today, I want to insist that it is not purely subjective, like some forms of abstract art, but a description of a reality that is out there such that one can meaningfully ask whether or not it adequately describes that reality. But it does not describe it in the same way as, for example, Pythagoras□s theorem, or Boyle□s law.

Lane then explains, following Aquinas, that biblical language is analogical and, following Calvin, an accommodation to our limitations. Then he takes up the non-technical nature of biblical speech.

> [T]he Bible almost without exception does not use precise technical terms. Theology as an academic discipline does define its terms, but theologians should not suppose the biblical writers were bound by these precise definitions . . .
> In light of these observations we should compare our theologies not with mathematical or scientific formulae but with models or maps of reality.

That is to say, orthodoxy can be expressed in more than one way (as even a comparison of canonical authors shows us – the Spirit did not inspire James, Peter, and Paul to express the same truths in identical language). Different terminological systems may in fact be fully compatible at a deeper level. Because all of our theological language can at best approximate the truth, orthodoxy is a circle rather than a pinpoint. In any theological dispute, it is important to show why the differences are more than merely verbal. In other words, one must demonstrate that the differences are a matter of substance, not merely shape or style. It is far too easy for people with different paradigms to talk *past* one another -- until they start yelling "Heretic!" *at* one another. Those engaged in theological debate must have the rare ability to climb outside their own paradigm, and compare it with alternative frameworks. Only in this way will our discussions be productive and useful to the church.

The Catechism's language also betrays its historical context. Its abstractness could easily give the impression that its form and style

are insulated from the viscidities of historical influence. In reality nothing could be further from the truth. The Westminster Standards as a whole were very much the product of various philosophical, cultural, political, and theological currents at work in the mid-seventeenth century. The timing of the Assembly more or less coincided with the rise of scholastic theology in a highly developed form, and the beginning of the modern scientific method.

Wilkins explains the historical and cultural milieu in which the Westminster Standards were produced:

> This tendency to speak in abstractions rather than in the concrete way of Scripture reflects the influence of Platonic thought on the Assembly. Leith quotes Basil Willey on the results of this influence: "we must expect to find the rationalisers largely concerned with putting an idea, and abstraction, where formerly there had been a picture. For only the abstract, only what could be conceptually stated, could claim to be real; all else was shadow, image, or at least 'type' or symbol." It is not that any particular members were sympathetic with Platonism, but this was in the "air" of the culture and clearly affected the way the Assembly did their theology.

The shape of Protestant scholasticism was largely determined by Rome's counter-reformation, as Wilkins notes:

> The Council of Trent (1545-1563) forced Protestant theology to give greater care to the technical precision of theological formulae. Trent produced precise, well-defined doctrines. Protestants felt compelled to counter Trent with equally precise and exact propositions. Even those who had no affinities to

scholasticism felt that they had to make use of some scholastic methods in order to defend themselves against Rome. Another influence in this direction came from the theological disputes with the Lutherans. Both pressures on the right and the left pushed the men of the Assembly to embrace a modified scholasticism.

Leith notes that the Reformed confessions prior to Trent (those formulated prior to 1563, the Genevan, Scots, the first Helvetic and French Confessions) were much less concerned with this kind of "precision" than were those formulated after Trent (the Canons of Dort, the Second Helvetic Confession, and Westminster). The early Protestant confessions used Biblical history as the framework on which to hang their doctrine. What one loses in precision with this method one gains in retaining the Biblical form of theology and its obvious relevance to human experience. The modified scholasticism of the Assembly meant theology began to look more like mathematics and science than art and life.

There are advantages to the abstract, precise, formulations produced by the Assembly. They are, in some ways, easier to teach, and are certainly better suited to debate with theological opponents (and especially with the theology of Trent). But its dangers seem to outweigh its advantages.

The emphasis upon logic greatly affected the nature of the Confession. Biblical theology is not illogical but the reliance upon logic has the danger of allowing our theological formulations to go beyond what the Scriptures teach and of removing them from reality. It tempts men to think that they

> understand far more than they actually do. Alfred North Whitehead spoke about the "Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness." This is the fallacy of taking an abstract characteristic and dealing with it as if it were what reality was like in its concrete form. The theological method of the Assembly led to misplaced concreteness in theology. Abstract propositions defined who God is and tended to replace or become the grid through which the Bible was understood.

Return to where we began. The Catechism is not bad. Indeed it is a positive good, and we should be thankful for it. But we need to be careful how we use it. Those who are most committed to the Catechism need to be most aware of its strengths *and* weaknesses. We must not turn its propositions into propositional*ism*. We are misusing it if we think it gives us all we need to understand the Bible. We misuse it if we insist that other Christians use its specialized terminology in order to be regarded orthodox. Just as someone could use orthodox terms and slogans, but do so in an unorthodox way, so others can use terms in ways we'd initially find unorthodox, even though the substance of their belief system does in fact square with orthodoxy upon closer investigation. (Several examples come to mind; Tom Wright's doctrine of justification may be the most obvious right now.) Citing a catechetical definition of a term can no more settle a theological dispute than citing an isolated prooftext out of context, or a theological slogan without any nuance. If we're going to be Reformed catholics we must learn to appreciate the Shorter Catechism for what it is — no more, no less. And we must learn to listen carefully to what other Christians are saying, without insisting

that they conform their terminology to ours in order to be regarded as brothers in Christ.

For more on the Westminster Standards and catholicity, see John Leith, *Assembly at Westminster: Reformed Theology in the Making*. See also John Murray, "The Nature and Unity of the Church," in *Collected Writings*, vol. 2, and "The Theology of the Westminster Confession of Faith," in *Collected Writings*, vol. 4. For an excellent discussion of how theological language works in relation to catholicity, see Anthony Lane, *Justification by Faith in Catholic-Protestant Dialogue: An Evangelical Assessment*, pages 128-132. I have profited greatly from Steve Wilkins Dabney Center lecture on the Westminster Confession given during the Spring semester in 2004. Several quotations are taken from his notes.